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Discursive Conflict in Communities and Classrooms

Communitarianism and compositionists' use of the concept of "communities of discourse," while intended to promote inclusive discourse, can easily fall prey to the myth of progressivism, ignoring the relative costs of discursive conflict or the pressures of consensus and conformity.

In a 1989 *CCC*'s Staffroom Interchange piece, Delores Schriner and William Rice describe a situation in which a foreign student writes an extremely homophobic message to a class mailing list—advocating the death penalty for homosexuals, something which is "a practice common in his homeland" (477). They say that the instructor recommended on the list that "students who were offended by the discussion should feel free to ignore it and go on to other 'items'"—advice that was itself ignored by some students, so that the argument did continue. Schriner and Rice conclude:

> In the end, however, the students clearly had learned how to negotiate among starkly different sets of values in their community, and during class meetings no hostile words or glances were directed to the dissenting student, who remained very much a part of the common enterprise. (477)

This narrative is typical in many ways. Anyone who has taught a discussion-based class has had something similar happen, and most of us have prob-

ably had a reaction similar to the teacher's. We want, somehow, not to censor a student yet neither to have the class dissolve in rancor. While the teaching of writing, especially argumentative writing, requires disagreement, the general perception is that too much conflict can threaten the "community of discourse" in the classroom by leading to a breakdown in civility. An unremarkable assumption in the passage quoted above is that the common enterprise would have collapsed had students been more personally hostile to the homophobic student. Schriner and Rice focus on the potential for that student to be alienated from the community; the story is a success because he was not.

At the center of the story is the issue of inclusion and difference. To some extent, it was hoped that the notion of communities of discourse in rhetoric and composition would help with that issue (albeit, generally in terms of students' inclusion into academic discourse communities); more recently, communitarian political theory has been proposed for that purpose (Killingsworth; Clark). My argument is that neither the concept of communities of discourse nor communitarian political theory has helped or will help composition instructors work through issues of inclusion and difference because these concepts are similarly troubled by confusion about the place of discursive conflict in communities. I will make this argument in three ways: by engaging in a less triumphal reading of the episode with the homophobic student, then explicating the controversies over communitarian political theory, and finally ending with a fairly brief discussion of the notion of communities of discourse.

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I. Community

I find the story of the homophobic student much more disturbing than Schriner and Rice seem to for two main reasons. First, I fail to see the maintenance of civility as such a triumph; second, I think that they were paying attention to the wrong difference. In regard to the first point, there is no indication that the students' sets of values were significantly changed by the e-mail exchange, nor even that they learned how to argue in substantially different ways. Thus, when Schriner and Rice say, "the students clearly had learned how to negotiate among starkly different sets of values in their community," they seem to mean simply that the students maintained American standards of civility in the classroom.

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This incident is presented as a narrative of successful negotiation of difference: but which difference? The foreign student on the mailing list was taking a different stance but one that is far from uncommon in American culture and that is dominant in his own. So, that student's position is only momentarily in the position of Other, and this is just one community in which it is an unpopular stance. For that student, being different in this regard is the anomalous situation. But, what about a gay student? Chances are good that at least one student in the class was homosexual. For that student or students, the "intense and lengthy exchanges on homosexuality" (Schriner and Rice 477) were likely simply one more instance of hearing themselves demonized, pathologized, and threatened.

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It may well have been a community that re-inscribed gay students' position as Other and that reinforced their alienation from the community. At the same time, the teacher's advice simply to ignore what must be a very frightening kind of message for a gay student to receive potentially trivializes the experience. That advice fails to distinguish between students who are offended by the notion that homosexuality is a crime that should be punished by death and those who feel themselves—and, to some degree, are—physically threatened by such an argument. Schriner and Rice refer to the "community" and "common enterprise," but to what extent were gay students ever part of that community, and to what extent did they feel a part of the common enterprise?

I would suggest that one could see a similar confusion in Schriner and Rice's comment about "the community's commitment to absolute freedom of expression" (477). Even ignoring the issue of whether or not the community actually had such a commitment—I assume the institution, if not the instructors, would have done something very quickly had someone started posting jpegs of child pornography—the fact that the instructors insisted upon the students having freedom from a certain censorship does not in any way ensure that students felt free to post what they really believed. James Kastely has discussed this problem as "the denial of difference in the postulation of the abstracted self of an idealized equality" (242). What *seems* to an instructor to be

an open and inclusive area for argument may or may not actually be one. No community has absolute freedom of expression either in the sense that the discourse is equally open to all points of view nor in the sense that the discourse has equal costs for all participants. There are different costs for a student who says, "some of my best friends are gay, and I do not think they should be executed," and a student who says, "I am gay, and I don't think I should be executed." The first is simply an argument in a class mailing list; the second is potentially a life change. Simply because the expression is not overtly censored by the instructor, it is not necessarily free. I will suggest that this is a political as well as pedagogical problem. Because there is a lot of discourse, we do not ask what kind it is. Because it does not appear that anyone is excluded from the physical community, we fail to think carefully about other forms of exclusion. The discourse of community can obscure the discursive inequalities that really exist among members of that community.

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II. Communitarianism

Something that troubles compositionists' discussions of politics and political discourse is that there is very little acknowledgment (or possibly even knowledge) of the variety of models for democratic discourse. A glaring example is when compositionists conflate a political agenda (e.g., conservative versus liberal) with models of democracy (e.g., the liberal versus agonistic public spheres). Although the word *liberal* comes up in both contexts, it does not mean the same thing (for an example of that conflation, see Killingsworth). By the term "liberal model," political theorists mean something that is only historically related to what is popularly called liberal politics or a liberal education. The relation between the two, as David Held has said, is historically complicated and very nearly random. A product of the Enlightenment (hence to avoid confusion I refer to it as "the Enlightenment model"), the liberal model theorizes a public space in which people rely on rational discourse in order to determine what is in the universal best interest. At the same time that they have the ability to ignore their own particular situations and needs, interlocutors remain fundamentally (even profoundly) individual—able to resist the pressures of conformity, to think critically about their own traditions, to stand above and away from the crowd.

Communitarianism takes issue with this view of public discourse and the role of the state on two points: first, whether the moral conditions necessary for democracy are sociohistorical constructs; second, whether liberal political theory's goal of autonomy means that there is too much emphasis on individual rights and too little emphasis on the public good.

Communitarian political theorists claim to be resurrecting the civic-republican model of someone like Aristotle (see especially Michael Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent*, Ronald Beiner, and Charles Taylor). Aristotle's vision of the public realm, they argue, is one that assumes a particular ethos, both of the culture at large and of the individuals who participate. By insisting that a cultural ethos and a political system are necessarily connected, they reject the Enlightenment model of the public sphere's positing democracy as something that transcends particular cultural mores (as in, for instance, John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* or Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*). Communitarians argue that the very existence of democracy depends upon a culture that presents participation in civic life as both a duty and a joy. In Sandel's terms, the premise is "to be free is to share in governing a political community that controls its own fate. Self-government in this sense requires political communities that control their destinies, and citizens who identify sufficiently with those communities to think and act with a view to the common good" (*Democracy's Discontent* 274). Thus, they argue, a central aspiration of the Enlightenment model of democracy (neutrality in regard to morals) is both inaccurate and destructive. It is inaccurate because the liberal model does have a moral agenda, privileging autonomy as an inherent good, and damaging because it encourages people to think of morality as a private issue, thereby facilitating evasion of participation in one's community.

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Beiner, for instance, uses a reductio ad absurdum in order to argue that the state cannot remain genuinely neutral to citizens' conceptions of the good life because democracy would collapse were enough people to pursue total hedonism:

> The liberal state ought to be uncompromisingly neutral . . . [in weighing] a conception of the good life geared toward the attainment of chemical euphoria at every opportunity [versus] a conception of the good life focused on ideas of social responsibility [. . .] . It should not require a very sophisticated moral reflection to see that this provides a recipe not for principled liberal statesmanship but for the

> moral self-destruction of the liberal state. To the extent that the state comes to understand itself in these terms, it brings down upon itself just this kind of self-vitiating calamity. (Beiner 67)

Beiner and others argue that there is an ethos of democracy that the state has a valid interest in promoting simply to preserve democracy.

There is empirical support for that claim. Democracy cannot be preserved simply through the presence of a democratic constitution because a democratic constitution is of little help if there is a military coup, corrupt judicial system, stronger country mining one's harbor and funding terrorists, cultural tolerance of corruption, and so on. Robert Dahl and others have articulated the conditions historically connected to democratic practice, some of which are institutional (such as civilian control of the military, a distinction between the military and the police forces, multiple sources of power) but many of which are cultural. The ethos must be one that values honesty, promotes concern for the public good, recommends tolerance, reveres long-term over short-term planning, favors universal education, encourages people to work within political systems to effect political change (Nie et al. 16–24, see also Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* 244–51, *On Democracy* 145–59).

Some communitarians position themselves between people who want the government to enforce moral behavior and those who argue that morality is always a private issue that is no one else's business. This middle ground has more discourse about morality but not (at least in theory) more laws requiring moral behavior. The "Responsive Communitarian Platform" says:

> Moral voices achieve their effect mainly through education and persuasion, rather than through coercion. Originating in communities, and sometimes embodied in law, they exhort, admonish, and appeal to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature. (Etzioni et al. xxvi)

Communitarians argue that legislation always does and always must have a moral basis and that a society must be grounded in some kind of moral consensus. But, "while we search for moral consensus, the ideas underpinning a moral consensus are mutual dialogue and persuasion, not imposition" (Etzioni, Introduction xix).

Communitarianism tends to be a very pragmatic discourse, with little in the way of theorizing in the way that, for example, Rawls or Habermas ponder the ontological assumptions behind their models of discourse. If there is some kind of philosophical basis, it tends to be Alasdair MacIntyre's work (especially

After Virtue) in which he argues, "the Aristotelian tradition can be restated in a way that restores intelligibility and rationality to our moral and social attitudes and commitments" (259). MacIntyre calls for rejecting the Enlightenment search for universal bases of moral discourse, suggesting that we should instead simply acknowledge and accept that our moral systems are particular. By accepting that they are not universal, we can also acknowledge that they need preservation and regeneration—that the duty of philosophy is and should be to encourage a specific set of ethics.

Charles Taylor has suggested that the very model of the self upon which democracy depends is just such a cultural construct and not a foundational (or transcendent) premise:

> The basic error of atomism in all its forms is that it fails to take account of the degree to which the free individual with his own goals and aspirations, whose just rewards it is trying to protect, is himself only possible within a certain kind of civilization; that it took a long development of certain institutions and practices, of the rule of law, of rules of equal respect, of habits of common deliberation, of common association, of cultural development, and so on, to produce the modern individual. (309; see also MacIntyre on the autonomous individual, 34)

But, without appealing to principles of some sort that undergird or transcend particular socio-historical preferences, it becomes difficult to defend some very fragile principles—such as the notion of minority rights. For many critics of communitarianism, the lack of foundation and apparent deference to community standards means that the tyranny of the majority looms large. The Civil Rights movement was a very anti-communitarian movement in that it violated numerous preferences of segregated communities; the whole argument depended upon rhetors like the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., being able to say that some laws were transitory and prejudiced (e.g., laws segregating public parks), while other laws were grounded in a more permanent foundation (e.g., in the Constitution, in Judeo-Christian ethics). The very legitimacy of Reverend King participating in the Birmingham protests, for instance, depended upon his rejection of community standards in favor of universals, perhaps most famously stated in his assertion in "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

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If one abandons the quest for transpolitical foundation, then how does one criticize *any* community? Critics of communitarianism fear that the logical consequence is that all preferences have equal weight—a preference for Christian prayer, a preference for civil rights, a preference for equal application of laws, a preference for segregation—as long as they are expressed as community preferences (for a brief discussion of this argument, see Habermas's "Three Normative Models"). In fact, on what grounds can communitarians criticize the Enlightenment model of discourse, which they grant to be the dominant one, without falling into self-contradiction? In addition, by their very arguments, they present some values as more foundational, more transcendent, than others (as when Sandel assumes that religious obligations are always stronger than secular ones), and they criticize what they themselves describe as a community practice—liberalism. There is, then, potentially a contradiction between what and how communitarians argue—to what extent do advocates of communitarianism themselves enact the practice they advocate?

Another question frequently raised is just what is supposed to happen to people who dissent from the community's morals. One possible answer, and one explicitly given by some communitarians, is that people who are unhappy with the ethos dominant in any given community have the ability to form their own communities (see especially Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent*, Etzioni's Introduction). Personally, I find this suggestion unintentionally reminiscent of the "America: Love It or Leave It" or "Back to Africa" bumper stickers that were popular during the Vietnam War controversy and Civil Rights movement. Beiner's criticism is more civil; he describes the logical problems in this solution, saying that

> The withdrawal into particularistic communities merely confirms what defines the problem in the first place. Here the communitarian is landed in a quandary that exactly matches that of the liberal. If what is required is a truly national community, the communitarian promise would seem to be a hopeless one, for clearly no modern industrial state can sustain this sort of community without stoking up the very hazardous fires of nationalism. On the other hand, if what is sought is the autonomy of local communities as such, there is no assurance that this will not give further momentum to the relativization of tastes and morals that mandated liberal neutralism in the first place. So the appeal to community, far from resolving the quandaries of liberalism, merely confirms them in another guise. (31)

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The practical consequence of the ostensible anti-foundationalism of communitarianism is that yet something else for which communitarians criticize Enlightenment theories—a tendency to mistake their own preferences for values with a foundational basis—is evident in their own discourse. The "Responsive Communitarian Platform," for instance, in its ringing endorsement of the two-parent family, equates two-parent families with heterosexual two-parent families, an equation that is not justified in the already problematic social science research the authors cite as support and which seems little more than sheer prejudice on their part. It is striking, after all, that this is the only plank based on social science research. The communitarian platform has no coherent underlying principle that informs when social science should determine public policy and when it should not.

One can make the same observation about communitarianism in general—while its pragmatic quality is very attractive, especially to rhetoricians, it gives the movement a kind of ad hoc quality that makes consistent applications of principles unlikely. While the central goal of communitarianism is that people should rely on persuasion more than on governmental intervention, the various authors in the *Essential Communitarian Reader* (Etzioni) argue for governmental intervention for such diverse purposes as to preserve affirmative action (Selznick 64), repeal no-fault divorce laws (Etzioni, "A Moral" 45 and Etzioni et al. "Platform"), actively engage in public health campaigns to promote marriage, attain full employment (Selznick 68), ban the sale of tobacco or turn it into a prescription drug (Goodin 121), use "taxation and regu-

lation to reduce the incidence of cigarette smoking" (Kleiman 224), make drinking alcohol a privilege which requires a license (Kleiman 224), engage in reinstitutionalization of the mentally ill (Siegel 194), institute anti-begging ordinances (Siegel 195), ban guns (Etzioni et al.), engage in random drug testing of people who have been previously convicted of drug possession (Kleiman 225). I do not list these because I think they are all absurd but because the almost random quality of the list suggests that communitarianism can be used to attack whatever happens to be the pet irritation of the particular author or require obeisance to their bigotry (as in the case of privileging heterosexual marriage). If theorists engage in this kind of behavior, it is hard to imagine that communities would not do so as well; thus, despite theorists' claims that communitarianism would not result in simple imposition of majority religious, social, and economic prejudices on minorities, the theorists' own rhetoric suggest that is exactly what would happen.

Communitarianism has a kind of pragmatic appeal and a pragmatic way to make its arguments. Yet this leaves one with the worry that the central terms, such as *community* and *speech*, are insufficiently theorized. Communitarian theorists are not always clear just when speech is action and when it may even inhibit action, so that it sometimes seems as though the goal is a vibrant and active public sphere of discourse with little thought as to the real consequences or costs of that speech. For instance, the "Responsive Communitarian Platform" says that people should be encouraged to voice their disapproval of one another and to "express our moral concerns to others when it comes to issues we care deeply about" (Etzioni et al. xxxi). The platform comments that people probably should not chastise one another about not keeping lawns green, but that's exactly what would happen—community associations are notorious for trying to intervene in the deepest corners of personal lives and often on very shaky bases.

Communitarians call for two things at the same time: more argument and more community. These two goals are not necessarily contradictory, but they can be, depending upon how one defines *community* and what kind of discourse one considers good argument. To the extent that a theory (or pedagogy) assumes that a good community has minimal conflict, it is almost certain to founder on the problems of inclusion and difference.

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tain to founder on the problems of inclusion and difference. The problem may well be in the vagueness of the term community, and both compositionists and communitarians have tried to clarify it by distinguishing between physical and intellectual communities. A more useful distinction is the one used by Beiner, who is himself adopting a distinction made by Robert Paul Wolff, between "affective" and "rational" communities. "Affective communities" are ones defined by shared values and shared identities, by what Beiner critically refers to as "the raptures of *Gemeinshaft*" (33). "Rational communities" are ones defined by the need to make decisions together, "a shared world of political concerns that affect all in common" (33). As long as we are after the raptures of *gemeinshaft*, civility is necessary and significant difference is dangerous. If, however, our expectation is not to feel snug but to make decisions along with the various people whom the decisions affect, then difference is necessary, and homogeneity is dangerous, and we find ourselves in conflictual discourse (which may or may not be especially civil). Beiner's distinction is wonderful, but for purposes of thinking about pedagogy, it's just slightly inadequate. To put it in a somewhat crude fashion, one might imagine a matrix with two axes. On one axis is the degree to which one considers ideal speech to be oriented toward agreement (irenic) or disagreement (agonistic). On the other axis is the degree to which one posits deliberation as the function of the public sphere, whether it is a place in which individuals simply express their points of view (expressive) or a place in which groups try to establish mutually binding policy (deliberative).

agonistic and expressive	agonistic and deliberative
irenic and expressive	irenic and deliberative

This is not the conventional way of categorizing speech, as most dominant theories (e.g., Alexander Bain, James Kinneavy) put expressive speech at the other end of a continuum from argument, but those theories ignore that there is such a thing as expressive argument (a very real possibility in communitarian political theory). In addition, such a taxonomy obscures that there is considerable difference of opinion as to just what makes an argument good. In an irenic public sphere, one defines a productive argument as one that results in the interlocutors reaching agreement on the issue about which they originally disagreed (or one in which there was never disagreement in the first place). In an agonistic public sphere, one defines an argument as productive if it raises interesting questions, brings up injustices, or draws attention to points of view that had been obscured (by agonistic, I mean the kind theorized

by Hannah Arendt, Kenneth Burke, or John Mill). By the criteria of an irenic public sphere, the Federalist/Anti-Federalist debate was a failure because the Federalists and Anti-Federalists never reached agreement; there is not even any indication that the major proponents of either view shifted position. If one values agonism, however, the debate was very productive, both in the sense that it led to a discussion of the constitutional principles that remains influential in Supreme Court decisions and political theory, and in the very pragmatic consequence that the debate led to the Bill of Rights.

The second axis concerns the function of discourse, whether the participants are trying to settle policy questions. Thus, one might have a fundamentally irenic group (such as a support group) that has two different kinds of meetings: ones in which people describe their experiences and express their feelings, expecting support, and ones in which the group is trying to determine policy, still with a strong ethos that people should be supportive of one another. This distinction is also obscured in much discourse concerning rhetoric, going as far back as Aristotle categorizing speech as deliberative, sometimes depending on its locus (as in *Rhetoric*) and sometimes depending on discursive qualities (as in *Nicomachean Ethics*). Yet, the distinction is important, as a purely expressive polis need not have any argumentation (one can express one's point of view just as effectively simply through voting or checking boxes in a poll), but deliberation requires that interlocutors pay attention to one another, interweaving others' arguments with their own.

Communitarians argue that there should be more argument about morals, that public discourse should not avoid such topics in the way that we do. But what kind of discourse should it be? Is it discourse that hopes to reach perfect agreement on issues of policy (irenic and deliberative)? Discourse in which there will be perfect agreement, but no policies will be set (irenic and expressive)? Discourse in which policies will be established, but agreement is expected to be contingent and imperfect (agonistic and deliberative)? Discourse in which people are trying to air their differences, expecting neither to reach agreement nor set policies (agonistic and expressive)?

These are axes, not dichotomies. The U.S. Congress is less agonistic than the British Parliament, more agonistic than the community association meetings I've observed. And, of course, any particular group will engage in a range of practices, at moments becoming more or less agonistic and deliberative, and so on. Thus, my point is not to drop certain practices into certain boxes but to point out potentially fatal contradictions.

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In an irenic and expressive public sphere, difference is a liability, insofar as it threatens to upset agreement. It is not inherently fatal to the discourse, though, as people may not even be aware of the degree of disagreement since, in an expressivist public sphere, one always has the option of expressing without listening or, to put it another way, closing one's eyes as one speaks. Thus, if communitarians imagine a public sphere that has more expression of arguments regarding morality, then having more argument and more community is not a contradiction (depending, to some degree, on the definition of community, discussed below), as long as people behave in a polite fashion to one another (as in the Schriner and Rice narrative). If that is their argument, however, I fail to see any absence of such argument; it seems to me that we already have a public sphere with plenty of sermonizing in which people do not listen to one another.

Difference *is* fatal, however, if one wants an irenic and deliberative public sphere. To deliberate together, people must listen, so they are well aware of the disagreement. More important, it seems common sense to me to say that the more things upon which people disagree (especially at the level of premises), the harder it will be for them to resolve their initial argument. Thus, if the public sphere is to be measured a success only if the interlocutors reach agreement (rather than, for instance, learn from the debate), success in the presence of difference is unlikely. If, as I infer, communitarians imagine an irenic and deliberative public sphere, they must necessarily imagine an extremely homogeneous community and/or one in which major disagreements are evaded. That seems to me a vision in which calling for more argument and more community is contradictory, unless one imagines perfect conformity on morals.

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Difference is a virtue in agonistic discourse, so a homogeneous community is a liability for that vision, whether the function of discourse is to express views or settle policy issues. It is not clear, however, that agonism and community are compatible, depending upon one's definition of community. Advocates

of agonistic rhetoric (e.g., Arendt, Burke) do not particularly revere agreement, except as contingent and temporary, nor do they value nonconflictual communities. Thus, there is not a contradiction in their desire for more discourse and more community. I am less convinced of that with communitarians like Sandel, Taylor, and Etzioni. I am also concerned with the pragmatic political consequences of an expressive public sphere, which assumes value in the mere expression of different points of view.

This last point is best explained through a consideration of William Chafe's history of the Civil Rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina. Chafe describes the "progressive mystique," which, he argues, unintentionally—but very seriously—inhibited progress on racial justice. The mystique of progressivism has several qualities, one of which is a tendency to confuse speech and action. Chafe says that southern white liberals often mistook willingness to listen to unorthodox ideas as a kind of action: "After all, even the delicate issue of racial change could be discussed, and discussion, in turn, could be seen as a step toward action" (7–8). Chafe suggests that this sense that talking was action meant they felt no need to do anything more than talk. Therefore, white liberals thought changes were happening in regard to racial issues because there was talk of changes, but because there were no discernible policy consequences of these discussions, African Americans did not see the situation as similarly productive. Chafe suggests this "courtesy toward new ideas" (8) in effect obstructed social action—the confusion between open discourse (among a small and elite group of people) and action contributed to complacency among white liberals. By the standards of the white progressives Chafe discusses—who simply wanted agonistic and expressive speech—their speech was perfectly good. By the standards of people who wanted political change—who wanted deliberative speech—it was not.

In addition to a fundamental vagueness regarding what kind of discourse is supposed to be conducted in communities, communitarians maintain a vague, if not contradictory, use of the term community. Joseph Harris points to the two uses of the term "community of discourse" in composition studies. Sometimes it means, "specific physical groupings of people . . . an actual group of speakers living in a particular place and time" ("A Teaching Subject" 101). At other times it means something more abstract: "individuals who share certain habits of mind" (101) or "a free and voluntary gathering of individuals with shared goals and interests—of persons who have not so much been forced together as have chosen to associate with one another" (102).

One of the important theoretical bases for communitarianism is the notion, argued perhaps most forcibly by MacIntyre, that effective discourse requires consensus on a large number of points. If people do not agree on basic principles, they cannot even agree enough to have an argument. Communitarians extend this argument to the polis, concluding that a competent polity necessitates "a commonality of shared self-understanding" (Sandel, *Liberalism* 181). This is obviously Harris's second use of the term—communities constructed by shared mental habits.

Yet, this analysis of what is wrong with current argument (and what makes medieval practice so much better) seems odd to me. In addition to the fact that I have trouble seeing the age that MacIntyre admires as so much better—the consequences for people who argued themselves onto the wrong side of a declaration of heresy certainly keep me from seeing that era as especially golden—I see no reason to assume that shared definitions and better arguments go hand in hand. Agreeing on numerous things does not ensure that interlocutors will reach agreement on whatever they initially disagreed about. The Federalists and Anti-Federalists are a case in point—Brutus and Publius have more in common than not, but the one thing they do not have in common (a desire that the U.S. would become a great commercial power versus a desire that it remain in a pastoral middle landscape peopled by petty bourgeois and yeoman farmers) was enough to preclude agreement on the need for the constitution. It is easy to list intra-disciplinary arguments on which there was never agreement but in which the positions would look indistinguishable to outsiders (e.g., Stanley Fish and E. D. Hirsch, Habermas and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Peter Elbow and Donald Bartholomae). The question is not simply how much people agree but on what they agree.

Communitarians like Sandel do not explicitly call for a univocal moral discourse, and the most attractive (I think) aspect of their argument is the idea that we should not be so afraid of moral arguments in the public sphere. Yet they ignore one of the main reasons that people dislike such arguments. Sandel cites as an instance of such fear Joycelyn Elders's reaction when then-President Clinton said that having children out of wedlock is wrong. Elders, Sandel says, "continued to display the nonjudgmental reflex characteristic of contemporary liberalism . . . stating, 'Everyone has different moral standards. You can't impose your standards on someone else'" (*Democracy's Discontent* 328). But Sandel fails to acknowledge why so many people have that reflex, at least one reason being that they (we) are tired of the narrow judgementalism

that often goes hand in hand with hypocrisy (like Clinton's condemning the sexual morality of single mothers or the highly edifying example of Newt Gingrich raising the issue of Clinton's sexual morality). The examples that Sandel cites as indicating a revivifying of moral argument are not instances of people arguing *about* morals; they exemplify people asserting, but not being willing to argue about, a specific moral code. If the goal is to have a public sphere in which people argue with one another, then arguments *from* morals are troubling. The problem with arguing from morals is that it ensures that people perceive an opposing argument as an immoral person. Why talk with someone who is immoral? Why listen?

Arguing from a specific (and unarguable) moral code means seeing one (and only one) side as the moral one; hence, such arguments are so full of hate. And that too is something that communitarians fail to acknowledge—that a tremendous amount of "moral" discourse is hateful. Even the arguments from MacIntyre's golden era (the high middle ages) are loaded with issues about who is arguing the side of the devil; they are filled with accusations of heresy. The liberal answer is to avoid moral discourse altogether, and I agree that such evasion is disturbing. Yet, the more that the communitarian answer assumes that an irenic public sphere is both necessary and good, the more that it assumes that discourse can only be productive among people who share moral systems and, thus, the more argument from, rather than about, morals.

This assumption of the necessity and desirability of an irenic public sphere, especially if connected to a definition of community as one with "shared moral visions," is subject to a fairly straightforward criticism: with such a formulation, dissent is dangerous. By that definition, the moment that one fundamentally disagrees with the group, the community no longer exists.

And this assumption of the necessity and desirability of an irenic public sphere, especially if connected to a definition of community as one with "shared moral visions," is subject to a fairly straightforward criticism: with such a formulation, dissent is dangerous. By that definition, the moment that one fundamentally disagrees with the group, the community no longer exists. A person who disagrees has made clear that s/he does not share the goals and interests and that s/he has different habits of mind, so there can never be significant dissent from within a community. Fundamental conflict and community are mutually exclusive.

Chafe describes the way that this presumption of the need for communities to be in agreement—another part of "the mystique of progressivism"—also prevented progress on racial issues:

> The underlying assumption is that conflict over any issue, whether it be labor unions, race relations, or political ideology, will permanently rend the fragile fabric of internal harmony. Hence, progress can occur only when everyone is able to agree—voluntarily—on an appropriate course of action. (7)

This assumption tends to benefit the status quo because an intransigent conservative can keep any change from happening, while it tends to demonize dissenters because it makes them the ones who seem to have disrupted the consensus and destroyed the happy community (for a similar point, see William Lee Miller on the antebellum treatment of abolitionists). The privileging of a happy community means that dissenters are the problem. When they criticize the status quo, it appears that everyone was happy until the malcontents started stirring things up. This was, for instance, exactly the argument made by the "Eight Alabama Clergymen" who so famously called Reverend King's actions in Birmingham "unwise and untimely" (Carpenter et al. 42). They "point out that such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems" (42).

The immediate consequence of this sense that conflict threatens community is that injustices—such as the injustice of segregation—never enter the realm of public discourse or are treated as local and temporary aberrations best resolved through observing "the principles of law and order and common sense" (Carpenter et al. 43). When civility prevails, no one wants to bring up such a divisive topic; when the topic is finally brought up, the issue becomes the behavior of those who violated the code of civility rather than their concerns regarding the injustice. Thus, attempting to have a public sphere without conflict means that one loses the ability to argue about central issues. So, in regard to civil rights, the discourse could quickly shift from the injustice of segregation to the appropriateness of those who even brought up the issue. This is what Chafe refers to as "the chilling power of consensus to crush efforts to raise issues of racial justice" (9). Prizing civility means that people who become confrontational or argumentative have violated a basic principle of social discourse, and they should be shunned and condemned. This privileging of evading conflict contributes to social harmony and can even facilitate an effective public sphere as long as the disagreements are relatively minor, but it cannot accommodate people who are deeply unhappy with the system itself.

And, to the extent to which one can say that there is a community, it is a community committed to injustice. Anthropologists have suggested that community identity is often formed by identifying some group as hated; the shared

mental habits that define a community are not necessarily as benevolent as communitarians might hope. Even Sandel grants this possibility: "To accord the political community a stake in the character of its citizens is to concede the possibility that bad communities may form bad characters" (*Democracy's Discontent* 321). Etzioni responds to this kind of criticism—that communities may be committed to injustice—by saying that people are members of many different communities: "they can, and do, use these multi-memberships (as well as a limited, but not trivial, ability to choose one's work and residential communities) to protect themselves from excessive pressure by any one community" (Introduction xiv). This response almost exactly misses the point. In addition to shifting back to talking about physical communities, Etzioni is describing precisely what worries people about the communitarian model: that people have a tendency to pull away from difference as much as possible and to spend as much of their time as they feasibly can with people who think and behave the same way that they do. The concern is that communitarian theory entrenches that tendency insofar as it presumes that discourse must be irenic to be productive, that community and conflict are opposed. Communitarianism does not ensure that members of more or less mainstream cultures hear other points of view. It does not necessarily complicate people's tendencies to slip into enclaves or stop them from universalizing on the basis of experience they do not even realize is limited. It is easily seduced by the mystique of progressivism in its overemphasis on the need for consensus and its failure to theorize conflict.

III. Communities of discourse

Compositionists' adoption of the notion of "communities of discourse" is usually traced through David Bartholomae, Kenneth Bruffee, and Patricia Bizzell back to Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and, ultimately, Thomas Kuhn. Often used interchangeably with the term "interpretive communities," the term is vague about the exact cause-effect claim implicit in it. For some theorists, it simply means something along the lines of "community-based norms that influence writing" (Beaufort 488), while for others it necessarily endorses a strong form of social construction of knowledge. Thomas Kent's definition is "our knowledge of others and of the world always will be relative to the particular conceptual schemes or communities in which we exist" (426). He connects this to "the claim that what we know is determined by or is relative to the community in which we live" (426). Thus, at one end of a spectrum, "communities of discourse" means little more than genre conventions, with the implication that

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people can move easily from one community to another; at the other end, the term becomes determinist, with the implication that communities of discourse so shape one's ability to know that discourse among communities is impossible or "incommensurable," to use Kuhn's language.

Most of the criticisms of the notion involve that stronger form; the weaker cause-effect claim has been more or less ignored. The criticisms generally run along one of three lines. Some theorists (Myers, Harris, or Trimbur) argue that the concept can easily describe students as people who must submit to the community, so writing classes become rites of passage into communities whose very nature students do not have the opportunity to critique or change. Entering the community means conforming to its standards, and the goal of all discourse is consensus, so that this is a fundamentally (albeit unintentionally) conservative project. A second, and closely connected, criticism is that the concept of a community of discourse overemphasizes agreement and uniformity, downplaying the tensions and disagreements that any community actually has (Cooper, Beaufort). The third criticism, one most effectively made by Kent, is that the epistemology at the very base of the notion is overdetermined and inaccurate.

The first two lines of criticism generally end with a call for a revision of the concept that would permit more conflict and somehow derail a community's rush toward consensus. John Trimbur, in his response to Bruffee, describes a practice in which he encourages his students to see a particular community of discourse (e.g., literary critics) as constructed by conventions that are particular, fractured, and open to dispute. In making this argument, Trimbur significantly (in both senses of the word) shifts the meaning of Bruffee's central metaphor: negotiation.

The metaphor of negotiation recurs in articles concerning communities of discourse, and it points to a central tension in the concept: what sort of relation students have to the conventions of the community of discourse they are trying to enter. Bruffee has students negotiating "the rocks and shoals of social relations" (403) whereas Trimbur has students negotiating "differences" (607). When a boat negotiates rocks and shoals, the boat does all the accommodating—the rocks and shoals will remain exactly where they began. Simi-

larly, the boat does not necessarily change as it passes by the various dangers. As in my reading of the homophobic student narrative, there is always the possibility that the boat, rocks, *and* shoals will end as they began.

Trimbur's use of the metaphor of negotiation, however, is the kind of negotiation that occurs between two people, both of whom are expected to make accommodations. Of course, social relations are not really rocks and shoals—they are not really all that stable—but they are not always subject to the students' changing them. The other use of the negotiation metaphor may initially seem to be one that assumes more power on the part of students, but it too is problematic. While in theory, negotiation may imply equality and reciprocally binding obligations, in practice negotiation is often indistinguishable from bargaining. It is naive to think that students negotiate as equals with communities of discourse or even that students have equal power when negotiating with one another.

In an important sense, I am being unfair to Schriner and Rice. If my main point is that their piece is insufficiently theorized in regard to concepts like community, negotiation, and difference, it would be legitimate for them to reply that they were, after all, just writing a Staffroom Interchange piece about the benefits they saw in a classroom mailing list. They were not trying to write a theoretical piece about communities of discourse; they were just using the concept. And *that* is my point. The situation that Schriner and Rice describe is a common one; anyone who has used mailing lists or engaged in student-centered discussion has had experiences similar to a student arguing for execution of homosexuals. And those theoretical pieces about communities of discourse—including ones like Trimbur's or Harris's that try to modify the concept—do not help. Moving to communitarian political theory is not necessarily any more helpful.

We need to imagine a public space in which people do not simply speak to each other but one in which they listen. And one in which they argue.

I agree with Trimbur, Harris, and Jarratt that compositionists evade conflict and that we need a model of teaching that makes conflict not simply a preliminary step toward consensus but a "public space where students can begin to form their own voices as writers and intellectuals" (Harris 116). But, it has to be a public space with rules. If all we strive for is "a sort of teaching that aims more to keep the conversation going than to lead it toward a certain end" (Harris 116), we can easily fall prey to the mystique of progressivism—mistaking a lively discussion for a place in which people are actually learning about difference. We need to imagine a public space in which people do not simply speak to each other but one in which they listen. And one in which they argue.

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